

John Keats

(1795 – 1821)



Biography:

John Keats, (born October 31, 1795, London, England – died February 23, 1821, Rome, Papal States [Italy]), English Romantic lyric poet who devoted his short life to the perfection of a poetry marked by vivid imagery, great sensuous appeal, and an attempt to express a philosophy through classical legend.

The son of a livery-stable manager, John Keats received relatively little formal education. His father died in 1804, and his mother remarried almost immediately. Throughout his life Keats had close emotional ties to his sister, Fanny, and his two brothers, George and Tom. After the breakup of their mother's second marriage, the Keats children lived with their widowed grandmother at Edmonton, Middlesex. John attended a school at Enfield, two miles away, that was run by John Clarke, whose son Charles Cowden Clarke did much to encourage Keats's literary aspirations. At school Keats was noted as a pugnacious lad and was decidedly "not literary," but in 1809 he began to read voraciously. After the death of the Keats children's mother in 1810, their grandmother put the children's affairs into the hands of a guardian, Richard Abbey. At Abbey's instigation John Keats was apprenticed to a surgeon at Edmonton in 1811. He broke off his apprenticeship in 1814 and went to live in London, where he worked as a dresser, or junior house surgeon, at Guy's and St. Thomas' hospitals. His literary interests had crystallized by this time, and after 1817 he devoted himself entirely to poetry. From then until his early death, the story of his life is largely the story of the poetry he wrote.

Early Works

Charles Cowden Clarke had introduced the young Keats to the poetry of Edmund Spenser and the Elizabethans, and these were his earliest models. His first mature poem is the sonnet "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" (1816), which was inspired by his excited reading of George Chapman's classic 17th-century translation of the Iliad and the Odyssey. Clarke also introduced Keats to the journalist and contemporary poet Leigh Hunt, and Keats made friends in Hunt's circle with the young poet John Hamilton Reynolds and with the painter Benjamin Haydon. Keats's first book, *Poems*, was published in March 1817 and was written largely under "Huntian" influence. This is evident in the relaxed and rambling sentiments evinced and in Keats's use of a loose form of the heroic couplet and light rhymes. The most interesting poem in this volume is "Sleep and Poetry," the middle section of which contains a prophetic view of Keats's own poetical progress. He sees himself as, at present, plunged in the delighted contemplation of sensuous natural beauty but realizes that he must leave this for an understanding of "the agony and strife of human hearts." Otherwise the volume is remarkable only for some delicate natural observation and some obvious Spenserian influences.

In 1817 Keats left London briefly for a trip to the Isle of Wight and Canterbury and began work on *Endymion*, his first long poem. On his return to London he moved into lodgings in Hampstead with his brothers. *Endymion* appeared in 1818. This work is divided into four 1,000-line sections, and its verse is composed in loose rhymed couplets. The poem narrates a version of the Greek legend of the love of the moon goddess (variously Diana, Selene, and Artemis; also identified as Cynthia by Keats) for Endymion, a mortal shepherd, but Keats puts the emphasis on Endymion's love for the goddess rather than on hers for him. Keats transformed the tale to express the widespread Romantic theme of the attempt to find in actuality an ideal love that has been glimpsed heretofore only in imaginative longings. This theme is realized through fantastic and discursive adventures and through sensuous and luxuriant description. In his wanderings, Endymion is guilty of an apparent infidelity to his visionary moon goddess and falls in love with an earthly maiden to whom he is attracted by human sympathy. But in the end the goddess and the earthly maiden turn out to be one and the same. The poem equates Endymion's original romantic ardour with a more universal quest for a self-destroying transcendence in which he might achieve a blissful personal unity with all creation. Keats, however, was dissatisfied with the poem as soon as it was finished.

Personal Crisis

In the summer of 1818 Keats went on a walking tour in the Lake District (of northern England) and Scotland with his friend Charles Brown, and his exposure and overexertions on that trip brought on the first symptoms of the tuberculosis of which he was to die. On his return to London a brutal criticism of his early poems appeared in *Blackwood's Magazine*, followed by a similar attack on *Endymion* in the *Quarterly Review*. Contrary to later assertions, Keats met these reviews with a calm assertion of his own talents, and he went on steadily writing poetry. But there were family troubles. Keats's brother Tom had been suffering from tuberculosis for some time, and in the autumn of 1818 the poet nursed him through his last illness. About the same time, he met Fanny Brawne, a near neighbour in Hampstead, with whom he soon fell hopelessly and tragically in love. The relation with Fanny had a decisive effect on Keats's development.

She seems to have been an unexceptional young woman, of firm and generous character, and kindly disposed toward Keats. But he expected more, perhaps more than anyone could give, as is evident from his overwrought letters. Both his uncertain material situation and his failing health in any case made it impossible for their relationship to run a normal course. After Tom's death (George had already gone to America), Keats moved into Wentworth Place with Brown, and in April 1819 Brawne and her mother became his next-door neighbours. About October 1819 Keats became engaged to Fanny.

The Year 1819

Keats had written "Isabella," an adaptation of the story of the *Pot of Basil* in Giovanni Boccaccio's Decameron, in 1817-18, soon after the completion of *Endymion*, and again he was dissatisfied with his work. It was during the year 1819 that all his greatest poetry was written—"Lamia," "The Eve of St. Agnes," the great odes ("On Indolence," "On a Grecian Urn," "To Psyche," "To a Nightingale," "On Melancholy," and "To Autumn"), and the two versions of Hyperion. This poetry was composed under the strain of illness and his growing love for Brawne, and it is an astonishing body of work, marked by careful and considered development, technical, emotional, and intellectual. "Isabella," which Keats himself called "a weak-sided poem," contains some of the emotional weaknesses of *Endymion*, but "The Eve of St. Agnes" may be considered the perfect culmination of Keats's earlier poetic style. Written in the first flush of his meeting with Brawne, it conveys an atmosphere of passion and excitement in its description of the elopement of a pair of youthful lovers. Written in Spenserian stanzas, the poem presents its theme with unrivaled delicacy but displays no marked intellectual advance over Keats's earlier efforts. "Lamia" is another narrative poem and is a deliberate attempt to reform some of the technical weaknesses of *Endymion*. Keats makes use in this poem of a far tighter and more disciplined couplet, a firmer tone, and more controlled description.

The odes are Keats's most distinctive poetic achievement. They are essentially lyrical meditations on some object or quality that prompts the poet to confront the conflicting impulses of his inner being and to reflect upon his own longings and their relations to the wider world around him. All the odes were composed between March and June 1819 except "To Autumn," which is from September. The internal debates in the odes centre on the dichotomy of eternal, transcendent ideals and the transience and change of the physical world. This subject was forced upon Keats by the painful death of his brother and his own failing health, and the odes highlight his struggle for self-awareness and certainty through the liberating powers of his imagination. In the "Ode to a Nightingale" a visionary happiness in communing with the nightingale and its song is contrasted with the dead weight of human grief and sickness, and the transience of youth and beauty—strongly brought home to Keats in recent months by his brother's death. The song of the nightingale is seen as a symbol of art that outlasts the individual's mortal life. This theme is taken up more distinctly in the "Ode on a Grecian Urn." The figures of the lovers depicted on the Greek urn become for him the symbol of an enduring but unconsummated passion that subtly belies the poem's celebrated conclusion, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." The "Ode on Melancholy" recognizes that sadness is the inevitable concomitant of human passion and happiness and that the transience of joy and desire is an inevitable aspect of the natural process.

But the rich, slow movement of this and the other odes suggests an enjoyment of such intensity and depth that it makes the moment eternal. "To Autumn" is essentially the record of such an experience. Autumn is seen not as a time of decay but as a season of complete ripeness and fulfillment, a pause in time when everything has reached fruition, and the question of transience is hardly raised. These poems, with their rich and exquisitely sensuous detail and their meditative depth, are among the greatest achievements of Romantic poetry. With them should be mentioned the ballad "La Belle Dame sans merci," of about the same time, which reveals the obverse and destructive side of the idyllic love seen in "The Eve of St. Agnes."

Keats's fragmentary poetic epic, *Hyperion*, exists in two versions, the second being a revision of the first with the addition of a long prologue in a new style, which makes it into a different poem. *Hyperion* was begun in the autumn of 1818, and all that there is of the first version was finished by April 1819. In September Keats wrote to Reynolds that he had given up *Hyperion*, but he appears to have continued working on the revised edition, *The Fall of Hyperion*, during the autumn of 1819. The two versions of *Hyperion* cover the period of Keats's most intense experience, both poetical and personal. The poem is his last attempt, in the face of increasing illness and frustrated love, to come to terms with the conflict between absolute value and mortal decay that appears in other forms in his earlier poetry. The epic's subject is the supersession of the earlier Greek gods, the Titans, by the later Olympian gods. Keats's desire to write something unlike the luxuriant wandering of *Endymion* is clear, and he thus consciously attempts to emulate the epic loftiness of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The poem opens with the Titans already fallen, like Milton's fallen angels, and Hyperion, the sun god, is their one hope of further resistance, like Milton's Satan. There are numerous Miltonisms of style, but these are subdued in the revised version, as Keats felt unhappy with them, and the basis of the writing is revealed after all as a more austere and disciplined version of Keats's own manner. There is not enough of the narrative to make its ultimate direction clear, but it seems that the poem's hero was to be the young Apollo, the god of poetry. So, as *Endymion* was an allegory of the fate of the lover of beauty in the world, *Hyperion* was perhaps to be an allegory of the poet as creator. Certainly this theme is taken up explicitly in the new prologue to the second version.

The second version of *Hyperion* is one of the most remarkable pieces of writing in Keats's work; the blank verse has a new energy and rapidity, and the vision is presented with a spare grandeur, rising to its height in the epiphany of the goddess Moneta, who reveals to the dreamer the function of the poet in the world. It is his duty to separate himself from the mere dreamer and to share in the sufferings of humankind. The theme is not new to Keats—it appears in his earliest poetry—but it is here realized far more intensely. Yet with the threat of approaching death upon him, Keats could not advance any further in the direction that he foresaw as the right one, and the poem remains a fragment.

Last Years

There is no more to record of Keats's poetic career. The poems "Isabella," "Lamia," "The Eve of St. Agnes," and *Hyperion* and the odes were all published in the famous 1820 volume, the one that gives the true measure of his powers. It appeared in July, by which time Keats was evidently doomed. He had been increasingly ill throughout 1819, and by the beginning of 1820 the evidence of tuberculosis was clear. He realized that it was his death warrant, and from that time sustained work became impossible. His friends Brown, the Hunts, and Brawne and her mother nursed him assiduously through the year. Percy Bysshe Shelley, hearing of his condition, wrote offering him hospitality in Pisa, but Keats did not accept. When Keats was ordered south for the winter, Joseph Severn undertook to accompany him to Rome. They sailed in September 1820, and from Naples they went to Rome, where in early December Keats had a relapse. Faithfully tended by Severn to the last, he died in Rome.

Letters

The prime authority both for Keats's life and for his poetical development is to be found in his letters. This correspondence with his brothers and sister, with his close friends, and with Fanny Brawne gives the most intimate picture of the admirable integrity of Keats's personal character and enables the reader to follow closely the development of his thought about poetry – his own and that of others.

His letters evince a profound thoughtfulness combined with a quick, sensitive, undidactic critical response. Spontaneous, informal, deeply thought, and deeply felt, these are among the best letters written by any English poet. Apart from their interest as a commentary on his work, they have the right to independent literary status.

Reputation

It is impossible to say how much has been lost by Keats's early death. His reputation grew steadily throughout the 19th century, though as late as the 1840s the Pre-Raphaelite painter William Holman Hunt could refer to him as "this little-known poet." His influence is found everywhere in the decorative Romantic verse of the Victorian Age, from the early work of Alfred, Lord Tennyson, onward. His general emotional temper and the minute delicacy of his natural observation were greatly admired by the Pre-Raphaelites, who both echoed his poetry in their own and illustrated it in their paintings. Keats's 19th-century followers on the whole valued the more superficial aspects of his work, and it was largely left for the 20th century to realize the full range of his technical and intellectual achievement.¹

¹ Graham Goulder Hough, "John Keats: British Poet", *Encyclopædia Britannica*, www.britannica.com/biography/John-Keats

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